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The MAHB, The Arts, and The Humanities

Paul R. Ehrlich

One question I am often asked is how the humanities can help out with the MAHB and other efforts to avoid a collapse of civilization. Analysts usually agree, based on the record of public education in evolution and climate disruption, that providing people with scientifically sound information does not move popular opinion very much. This is especially true if the conclusions indicate a need for social change, new thinking, or sacrifice. I think the role that can be played by the arts is clear to most people; the impact of photographs on thinking about the environment has been enormous (the iconic first picture of Earth from outer space being the classic example).

When being interviewed about [On the Nature of Things](#), the ecology-science dance show that Karole Armitage and I put together in 2015, I was often asked why I thought the humanities, in addition to the arts, could help solve the human predicament. The answer is purely based on my likes and personal observations, not on “scientific” evidence. I usually use a famous Abe Lincoln story to exemplify the potential impact of literature. When the President was introduced during the Civil War to Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, he greeted her with "So you're the little woman who started this big war!"

The potential contribution of photography is clear. For instance, one of my valued colleagues, distinguished neurobiologist Sue McConnell, has been very concerned about the loss of biodiversity. She became a superb photographer and has been teaching conservation

photography to students. No one can see a display of her elephant photos and not feel closer to and more sympathetic with those magnificent animals. On the possible role of music, I think back to my World War II childhood experience with martial music. Does the environmental movement need the equivalent of the Marine's Hymn? Could the music world produce a song to express the tragic loss of biodiversity with the impact of *Lili Marlene*?

Philosophy, ethics, history, music, art, and so on are often lumped into the humanities, but here I'd like to say something about literature and poetry. I think both can be extremely helpful to thinking about the human predicament—and in constructing narratives that could have emotional impact and deepen understanding of what the dangers we face really mean. Such an understanding by the public at large is a critical prerequisite to addressing and solving our existential problems.

One of the pleasures of my life has always been reading, a wonderful way to expand one's experiences. I read all the time and listen to recorded books as I walk and wait in airports and doctor's offices. It's often technical tomes or histories, especially histories about the two World Wars (which I've long viewed as two acts of the same historical event). I think one learns a lot about human behavior when it is behavior under stress. I also read novels, especially those based on accurate historical material or showing interesting human behavior. Many have been both a great pleasure to read and useful sources of information. I remember well how reading Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, like the original movie, decades ago altered my view of war. I've never forgotten what the protagonist (okay, a butterfly collector named Paul!) said when he returned on leave and found his old teacher trying to persuade more young boys to enlist.

Mary Doria Russell's *Epitaph* introduced me to life and "development" in the old West in realistic depth, as Katherine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* did for slum life in modern India. My favorite novel of all time, Michael Shaara's *Killer Angels* evoked pathos over the careers of Civil War officers. Wilbur Smith's *The Burning Shore* gave me a feel for the culture of San Bushmen in South Africa, Smith's page-turning narrative *A Time to Die* changed my thinking on southern African politics and conflict, filling in details of what I was first introduced to in 1966 traveling through Portuguese East Africa (now Mozambique) while the Portuguese army was fighting the Frelimo liberation movement, and visiting Southern Rhodesia (and committing a capital crime by criticizing Ian Smith's government). Recently I was reading our friend Bob Carr's *Diary of a Foreign Minister* (he was Premier of New South Wales for 11 years and greatly interested in the environment before becoming Australia's foreign minister) and discovered that he was also a fan of novelist Alan Furst. Furst's gripping novels taught me more about the run-up to World War II than any history text ever has. One of my greatest regrets at

the prospect of dying is that I'll never get through all the books stacked by my bed or on my iPad and iPhone.

Many lines from poetry have fit in with my thoughts. The poet imperialist Rudyard Kipling looked at his beloved British empire, for which his only son John died in the trenches of France, and wrote "Far call'd our navies melt away, on dune and headlands sinks the fire. Lo all our pomp of yesterday is one with Nineveh and Tyre." *One with Nineveh* became the title of a book Anne and I wrote about the prospective end of our civilization.

I agree with my old acquaintance Vladimir Nabokov that human existence is a "brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness," and think an "afterlife" is a nonsensical idea. Nonetheless I take comfort from Housman's thought: "Clay lies still, but blood's a rover; breath's a ware that will not keep. Up, lad: when the journey's over there'll be time enough for sleep."

We know scientifically that emotional input is required for decision-making. With part of the frontal lobes that control emotions damaged, a person may have committed to memory the menu of every restaurant in town, but be unable to decide where to eat. The "rational choice" theory once beloved of most economists and many political scientists is a theory about something that doesn't exist—as Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky so famously demonstrated long ago. That emotional input is something that literature and art can provide.

It is, of course, a two-edged sword. In the absence of adequate supporting information, emotion can steer populations in self-destructive ways, as has happened with the denial of climate disruption by Donald Trump and many Republican politicians, among others. There is a long history of demagogues leading societies to disaster, as Adolph Hitler demonstrated so dramatically. So our challenge is to create narratives that will grab people and yet steer civilization toward sustainability, which implies as well a broad discussion and contemplation in literature of the many ethical challenges society now faces.

This post is part of the [MAHB's Arts Community space](#) —an open space for MAHB members to share, discuss, and connect with artwork processes and products pushing for change. Please visit the [MAHB Arts Community](#) to share and reflect on how art can promote critical changes in behavior and systems and [contact Erika](#) with any questions or suggestions you have regarding the space.

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